

PERSISTENT VOLATILE MEMORY FAULT TRACKING

Inventors:

Ken G. Pomaranski and Thane M. Larson

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

The present invention relates generally to computer systems.
10 More particularly, the present invention relates to memory systems.

Description of the Background Art

In today's computer industry, dynamic random access memories
15 (DRAMs) are one of the dominant memory technologies. DRAMs are the preferred choice for large main memories because they are inexpensive, fast and consume little power. DRAMs are typically manufactured in discrete semiconductor packages having different input/output (I/O) data widths of, for example, sixteen, thirty-two, or sixty-four, or more data bits.

20 The number of data bits that a computer can simultaneously address and manipulate, i.e., the computer bus width, is typically much larger than that commonly available with DRAMs. To accommodate these bus widths, groups of DRAMs are typically packaged together to form memory modules, such as, for example, DIMMs (Dual In-line Memory Modules) and other types of
25 memory modules.

FIG. 1A shows a side view of a conventional memory system **100** with two DIMM modules. The memory system **100** includes a CPU or memory controller **102** affixed to a motherboard **106** and two dual in line memory modules **108a** and **108b**. The two memory modules **108a-b** shown each
30 includes N memory devices **112** connected in parallel. Assuming for purposes of discussion that N is equal to eighteen, the eighteen memory devices **112a-N** on each memory module **108a** and **108b** are connected to the memory controller

102 by a data bus **114**, which includes board trace portions **116**, a connectors **118** and a module trace portions **120**.

FIG. 1B shows a block diagram of the memory structure of the memory modules of the memory system **100** shown in FIG. 1A. In FIG. 1B, the data bus is 72 bits wide where 64 bits are used for data and 8 bits are used for error correction. Each of the eighteen memory devices on the memory module **108a-b** is 4 bits. The eighteen memory devices are connected in parallel so that for each memory operation, the output onto the data bus **114** is 72 bits wide.

FIG. 1C shows a clock pulse for reading or writing to a memory location of the memory system **100** shown in FIG. 1A. The memory controller **102** reads a single word or memory location from a single memory module at a time. Assuming a single data rate (SDR) system and a read operation, the memory location in memory module **108** having the address 000000 is read at the clock edge t_1 . The contents of the memory location is 72 bits wide. No memory operation occurs at clock edge t_2 . A second memory location having the address location 000001 in memory module **108** is read at the clock edge t_3 .

FIG. 2A shows a side view of a conventional memory system **200** having eight DIMM modules. Similar to the configuration shown in FIG. 1A, the memory system **200** shown in FIG. 2A includes a CPU or memory controller **202** affixed to a motherboard **206**. However, this configuration includes eight dual in line memory modules **208a-h** instead of the two DIMMs **108a-b** shown in FIG. 1A. The eight memory modules **208a-h** shown each includes N memory devices **212**. The memory controller **202** is connected to the eight memory modules **208a-h** by a data bus **214**, which includes board trace portions **216**, connectors **218** and module trace portions **220**.

FIG. 2B shows a block diagram of the memory structure of the memory system **200** shown in FIG. 2A. In the system shown, the data bus is 144 bits wide where 128 bits are used for data and 16 bits are used for error correction. Preferably each memory module includes eighteen memory devices (N=18), each memory device being 4 bits wide. For each memory module, the memory devices are connected in parallel. Data is read from two memory modules simultaneously, so that for each memory operation, the output onto the data bus **214** is 144 bits wide.

FIG. 2C shows a clock pulse for reading or writing to a memory location of the memory system **200** shown in FIG. 2A. The memory controller **202** reads a single word or memory location from a single memory module at a time. Assuming a double data rate (DDR) system and a memory read operation, the memory location in memory module **208a** having the address 000000 and the memory location in memory module **208e** having the address 000000 are both read simultaneously at the clock edge t_1 . A second memory location in memory module **208a** having the address location 000001 and a second memory location having the address 000001 in memory module **208e** are both read simultaneously at the clock edge t_2 .

The above-discussed relatively simple memory systems are merely illustrative examples discussed for background purposes. There are numerous other memory system configurations, some much larger and more complex than those discussed above. With the ubiquity of memory systems in computer systems, improvements in the methods and apparatus for utilizing and maintaining such memory systems are highly desirable.

SUMMARY

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One embodiment of the invention pertains to a method for persistently tracking volatile memory faults. A memory error is detected in relation to at least one dynamic random access memory (DRAM) unit on a particular memory module. An entry pertaining to the memory error is written in non-volatile memory of a fault storage unit on that particular memory module.

Another embodiment of the invention pertains to a memory module that persistently tracks volatile memory faults. The memory module includes a plurality of dynamic random access memories (DRAMs) and a fault storage unit. The fault storage unit includes non-volatile memory configured to store entries pertaining to faults in the plurality of DRAMs on that memory module.

Another embodiment of the invention pertains to a circuit board that includes a plurality of connectors configured to connect to a plurality of memory modules, a memory controller, and a memory error interface. The memory controller is configured to read and write data into volatile memory units of the

memory modules, while the memory error interface is configured to provide read and write access to non-volatile fault storage units of the memory modules.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

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FIG. 1A shows a side view of a conventional memory system having two DIMM modules.

FIG. 1B shows a block diagram of the memory structure of the memory modules of the memory system shown in FIG. 1A.

FIG. 1C shows a clock pulse for reading or writing to a memory location of the memory system shown in FIG. 1A.

FIG. 2A shows a side view of a conventional memory system having eight DIMM modules.

FIG. 2B shows a block diagram of the memory structure of the memory system shown in FIG. 2A.

FIG. 2C shows a clock pulse for reading or writing to a memory location of the memory system shown in FIG. 2A.

FIG. 3 is a flow chart of a conventional method of tracking volatile memory faults.

FIG. 4 is a schematic diagram of a system for persistently tracking volatile memory faults in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 5 is a flow chart of a method of persistently tracking volatile memory faults in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 6 depicts fields of memory error entries in a fault storage unit in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

A computer memory system may include anywhere from a few DIMMs (for example, in a personal computer or a small server) to thousands of DIMMs (for example, in a large server system). High end servers also typically include high availability features such as memory chip redundancy and hot swapping. When a permanent memory error occurs (for example, a stuck-at bit,

a stuck-open bit, or a "weak cell"), the location of the error is typically kept in system logs. The system logs reside in a central location such as a disk drive of the system, or on the system board. The system log typically tracks the DIMM number and DRAM location that has the error.

5 This technique of tracking may work sufficiently well if that DIMM is not moved. However, if the DIMM is moved to another physical location (for example, another slot) in the same system or in a different system (for example, a system used for debug purposes), then the error tracking is lost. This is because the error information resides on the host system and pertains to a
10 particular location in the host system.

 An embodiment of the present invention provides a means to persistently track a permanent memory error on a memory module, even if the memory module is moved to a new physical location. In accordance with an embodiment of the invention, the fault information is stored locally on the
15 particular DIMM that has the memory error. Hence, when and if that DIMM is moved, the error information moves along with the DIMM. If the new location is in a new host system (or in a new location in the same system), then this embodiment allows for the system to proactively deal with the fault, rather than having to discover it again after another memory error. For example, when a
20 DIMM configured in accordance with an embodiment of the invention is plugged into a system, the existing known errors that have been persistently tracked may be dealt with by a "fault handler" routine, instead of the operating system having to rediscover the errors. Rediscovery of such errors is itself error prone and may result in system crashes.

25 In one application of this embodiment, when a DIMM is physically moved to a debug system for debugging purposes, either at a customer site or at a repair center, this embodiment significantly facilitates the process to debug the error. This is because the tool for debugging the DIMM may be configured to have access to all the DRAM bits that went bad. This information would give a
30 person debugging a much clearer picture of what occurred. In other words, the memory error history aids in debugging of the DIMM, which decreases downtime and reduces maintenance costs.

FIG. 3 is a flow chart of a conventional method of tracking volatile memory faults. Sometime during the operation of the computer system, a memory error is detected **302**. The specific location of the memory error is determined **304**. The memory error detection **302** and location determination **304** may be performed, for example, by the operating system. The specific location may be indicated as being at specific address(es) of specific DRAM(s) on a particular memory module.

To track the memory error, the memory error information is stored **306** in a system log. The system log may be kept, for example, on the system board or on a system disk. The memory error information may be used to remove **308** the faulty memory bits from the set of useable memory that is actively utilized by the computer system.

In such a conventional system, if a memory module with memory errors thereon is moved **310** and rebooted **312** in a new physical location, then the tracking of the memory errors no longer applies to that module. This is because the memory error information is correlated to a particular physical location for the memory module. Hence, after such a move, the memory error information is lost, until it is re-detected **302**, for example, by the operating system. Disadvantageously, such re-detection **302** involves the occurrence of another memory based error and may involve a detrimental result such as a system crash.

FIG. 4 is a schematic diagram of a system for persistently tracking volatile memory faults in accordance with an embodiment of the invention. The system includes a system board **400** and multiple DIMM modules **450**. In some larger computing systems, the system board **400** may be referred to as a cell board **400**.

The system board **400** includes various components. A central processor unit (CPU) **402** executes software instructions and operates as a "brain" that coordinates the operation of other components on the board **400**. Although one CPU **402** is illustrated, an actual system may utilize a single CPU or multiple CPUs **402** for this functionality. The CPU **402** is shown as communicatively coupled to a memory controller **404** and a processor dependent hardware (PDH) interface **408**. These communicative couplings may comprise,

for example, a communications bus or other communications means. Other components (not illustrated) may also, of course, be communicatively coupled to the CPU **402**, such as an input/output interface, a data storage interface, a display interface, and other devices.

5 The memory controller **404** is used to control the reading of data from and writing of data to the DRAM chips on the DIMM modules **450**. The memory controller **404** may be implemented to operate, for example, similarly to the memory controllers discussed above in relation to FIGS. 1 and 2. The specific operation of the memory controller **404** will depend upon the specific
10 characteristics of the memory being controlled (for example, whether the DRAM is asynchronous or synchronous, whether the DRAM is single data rate or double data rate, whether it is direct Rambus® DRAM (DRDRAM®), and so on). Embodiments of the present invention should not typically be limited to a particular type of DRAM.

15 In one embodiment, a manageability processor (MP) **420** may be included on the system board **400**. The MP **420** may be used to control the monitoring of status, the logging of events and abnormal conditions, and the recovery capabilities in relation to the memory system. In one embodiment, the manageability processor **420** may be configured to be compliant with the
20 intelligent platform management interface (IPMI) specification. The IPMI specification is currently available from Intel via the Internet by way of the following URL: <http://www.intel.com/design/servers/ipmi/spec.htm>. The Intelligent Management Platform provides functions that are available independent of the main processors, BIOS, and operating system. IPMI
25 messaging uses a request/response protocol. IPMI request messages (also called commands) are grouped into functional command sets, using a field called the network function code. There are command sets for sensor and event related commands, chassis commands, and so on.

 The PDH interface **408** allows the CPU **402** and/or the MP **420** to
30 communicate with other components shown, including a processor dependent code (PDC) unit **410**, scratch memory **412**, and a memory error interface unit **406**. In the embodiment illustrated in FIG. 4, the system board **400** includes both the CPU **402** and the MP **420** and both are communicatively coupled to the PDH

interface **408**. In another embodiment, the system board **400** includes both the CPU **402** and the MP **420**, but only the MP **420** is communicatively coupled to the PDH interface **408**. In another embodiment, the system board **400** includes only the CPU **402** and not the MP **420**.

5 The PDH interface **408** may be implemented using a microcontroller. The PDC unit **410** may comprise a form of non-volatile memory, such as, for instance, flash memory or a type of read only memory (ROM). The PDC unit **410** may be configured to include boot code and error handling code to be executed by one of the processors on the system board **400**. The scratch
10 memory **412** may be implemented using volatile and/or non-volatile scratch RAM. The scratch memory **412** is utilized to temporarily store data.

 The memory error interface **406** is communicatively coupled to the fault storage units **454** on the DIMM modules **450**. The memory error interface **406** is configured with circuitry to enable read and write access to the fault
15 storage units **454**. More specifically, the memory error interface **406** writes and reads memory error data to and from the fault storage units **454**.

 There are at least three DIMM modules **450** depicted in FIG. 4, but embodiments of the present invention are not limited to a specific number of memory modules. Furthermore, although DIMMs **450** are depicted and
20 discussed, embodiments of the present invention need not necessarily be limited to a specific type of memory module. Other types of memory modules include single in-line memory modules (SIMMs), Rambus in-line memory modules (RIMMs®), and others.

 Each memory module **450** couples to the system board by way of a
25 memory slot. The memory slot is configured appropriately depending on the type of memory module. Again, while at least three memory slots are illustrated in FIG. 4, embodiments of the invention are not limited to a specific number of memory slots.

 Each memory module **450** includes a plurality of DRAM chips **452**
30 and a fault storage unit **454**. The DRAMs **452** comprise volatile memory in that they require the application of power to retain data therein. In contrast, the fault storage units **454** comprise non-volatile memory in that they retain data therein regardless of the application of power thereto. Each memory module **450** also

includes circuitry configured to provide read and write access by the memory controller **404** to the DRAMs **452** and circuitry configured to provide read and write access by the memory error interface **406** to the fault storage **454**. In accordance with an embodiment of the invention, the fault storage unit **454** on
5 each memory module **450** advantageously stores entries pertaining to faults in the plurality of DRAMs **452** on that same memory module **450**.

FIG. 5 is a flow chart of a method of persistently tracking volatile memory faults in accordance with an embodiment of the invention. This method is advantageous over the conventional method of FIG. 3.

10 Like in the conventional method of FIG. 3, sometime during the operation of the computer system, a memory error is detected **302**. The specific location of the memory error is determined **304**. The memory error detection **302** and location determination **304** may be performed, for example, by the operating system. The specific location may be indicated as being at specific
15 address(es) of specific DRAM(s) on a particular memory module. To track the memory error, the memory error information is stored **306** in a system log. The system log may be kept, for example, on the system board or on a system disk. The memory error information may be used to remove **308** the faulty memory bits from the set of useable memory that is actively utilized by the computer
20 system.

In accordance with an embodiment of the invention, in addition to the memory error information being stored **306** in the system log, the memory error information is also written **502** into the non-volatile memory of the fault storage unit on the same memory module as that which contains the memory
25 error. This step **502** may be performed under the control of the error handler code in the PDC unit. The memory error information may be written in the form of an entry in a memory error table. An example of such a table is described below in relation to FIG. 6.

In accordance with an embodiment of the invention, even if a
30 memory module with memory errors thereon is moved **310** to a new physical location, the tracking of the memory errors on that module still persists. This is because the memory error information is stored persistently in the non-volatile memory of the fault storage unit on that module. Hence, when the memory

module is rebooted **312** in its new physical location, the boot code in the PDC unit may be executed to obtain the memory error information by reading **504** the memory error entries in the fault storage unit on that module. Advantageously, obtaining the memory error information from the fault storage unit avoids the need for the operating system to re-detect **302** the memory errors on the moved module, preventing unnecessary memory based errors and possible system crashes.

FIG.6 depicts fields of memory error entries in a fault storage unit in accordance with an embodiment of the invention. As shown, the memory error table may include various fields for each entry, each field corresponding to a column in the illustrated table and each entry corresponding to a row in the illustrated table.

In one implementation, the fields include a DRAM number **602**, a start bit of the memory error **604**, and an end bit of the memory error **606**. The DRAM number **602** indicates a specific DRAM chip on the memory module in which the error is located. The bit range in the DRAM which includes the faulty memory bits are indicated by the start **604** and end **606** bits. If the group of bits related to a memory error are not contiguous, then more than one entry would be used to store the memory error information in the fault storage unit.

Other implementations of the memory error table may also be used in accordance with other embodiments of the invention. For example, additional fields may be included, such as, for example, a field indicating the last time at which the memory error was detected and the number of times the bit range has failed. A requirement of the memory error table is that the table indicates the specific location of detected memory errors, including the specific DRAM chip and the specific bit(s) therein.

In the above description, numerous specific details are given to provide a thorough understanding of embodiments of the invention. However, the above description of illustrated embodiments of the invention is not intended to be exhaustive or to limit the invention to the precise forms disclosed. One skilled in the relevant art will recognize that the invention can be practiced without one or more of the specific details, or with other methods, components, etc. In other instances, well-known structures or operations are not shown or

described in detail to avoid obscuring aspects of the invention. While specific embodiments of, and examples for, the invention are described herein for illustrative purposes, various equivalent modifications are possible within the scope of the invention, as those skilled in the relevant art will recognize.

5 These modifications can be made to the invention in light of the above detailed description. The terms used in the following claims should not be construed to limit the invention to the specific embodiments disclosed in the specification and the claims. Rather, the scope of the invention is to be determined by the following claims, which are to be construed in accordance
10 with established doctrines of claim interpretation.